NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY

NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

DID CLAUSEWITZ WIN THE AMERICAN REVOLUTIONARY WAR?

John G. Fox/Class of 2000
Course 5602
Seminar C

FACULTY SEMINAR LEADER:
Colonel McIntyre

FACULTY ADVISOR:
Ambassador Pringle

Report Documentation Page

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

1. REPORT DATE	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED
2000	**N/A**	**-**

4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE	5a. CONTRACT NUMBER
Did Clausewitz Win the American Revolutionary War?	5b. GRANT NUMBER
	5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER
6. AUTHOR(S)	5d. PROJECT NUMBER
	5e. TASK NUMBER
	5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) **National Defense University National War College Washington, DC**	8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)	10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)
	11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)

12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Approved for public release, distribution unlimited

13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES

14. ABSTRACT

15. SUBJECT TERMS

16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT	b. ABSTRACT	c. THIS PAGE			
unclassified	**unclassified**	**unclassified**	**UU**	**15**	

"The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish .... the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature. This is the first of all strategic questions and the most comprehensive."

Carl von Clausewitz, On War

Did Clausewitz Win the American Revolutionary War?

It may seem odd to ask whether Clausewitzian strategy can explain the success of the rebellious colonies in the American Revolutionary War. After all, Clausewitz was almost entirely concerned with warfare on the European continent and, most particularly, with the changes brought about by Napoleon's military campaigns. On War barely mentions the American Revolutionary War.[1]

The question may seem even less appropriate if one narrows the focus, as I intend to do, to George Washington and his strategy. Washington is not best remembered as a military commander. His Revolutionary War record is often given scant attention or is criticized as lacking in major victories (except at Yorktown, with a great deal of French assistance). Sometimes, Washington is even taxed with military incompetence (as in the defeat and near capture of himself and his forces on Long Island and Manhattan). Garry Wills' study of Washington's apotheosis as an American hero begins only after the war, with his resignation of his military commission.[2] Perhaps this attitude toward Washington's war record is not surprising, since he later served with distinction as the first President of the United States, a fact that might well have overshadowed even the most illustrious military career.

And yet, to focus on Washington the President or Washington the battlefield commander is to risk missing his significance as a strategist. On this level, Washington

[1] Carl von Clausewitz, On War, ed. and trans. by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, Princeton University Press, 1976, p. 188.

excelled -- and the particular way in which he did so shows how Clausewitz' theory of war can be used as a framework for evaluating conflicts quite different from those that were the focus of the Prussian theorist's attention.

***

When Washington took command of the Continental Army surrounding Boston in June 1775, he faced a complex and difficult set of tasks. He had to achieve total independence for all 13 rebellious colonies by persuading the British government to cease fighting and to withdraw its forces. He had to preserve, at all costs, the existence of his small army. He had to fight with few forces and without relying on the hope of foreign intervention (which came only much later, after 1778). And he had to fight in such a way that the peace following the war would allow the United Colonies to be accepted by the established powers on equal terms as a state, and would allow the development of the new state as a republic. What military strategy could possibly achieve these ambitious goals?

An examination of Washington's ultimately successful strategy for winning the Revolutionary War shows it to vindicate important principles that Clausewitz would later codify in On War. As we will see, Washington from the beginning had a clear idea of the kind of war he had to fight and the political goals he had been assigned to achieve. Within the severe constraints imposed on him by the small size and fragility of his army, he forged a military strategy tailored to attain these political goals. This strategy showed an appreciation for the importance of centers of gravity, of decisive battles and for what would later be called the "Clausewitzian trinity." Finally, he continued to pursue the

---

[2] Wills, Garry, Cincinnatus: George Washington and the Enlightenment, Doubleday and Company, 1984. The other two episodes that Wills examines in detail are Washington's return from civilian life to chair the

same political goals and to consolidate his wartime political achievements long after the war, as President of the United States.

Of course, to claim that Washington's success can be explained entirely in Clausewitzian terms would be to over-simplify. In some areas, such as the usefulness of military intelligence, Washington contradicted Clausewitz' views. Other aspects of the Revolutionary War -- for example, its prolonged nature and dependence of the outcome on the strength of will of the opposing sides -- might better be explained by Mao. Still others, as when Washington forced the British to evacuate New Jersey in the winter of 1777 by placing his army astride their communications, evoke Liddel-Hart or Sun-Tzu, But at its political heart, Washington's war was Clausewitzian. And by fighting the war with an eye on the type of peace he wished to ensue, Washington the general may have affected the shape of the future American republic as fundamentally as did Washington the President. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say, more than 200 years after the end of the Revolutionary War, that we still benefit from the most "Clausewitzian" aspects of Washington's wartime strategy.

What Kind of War?

When Washington was named military commander-in-chief by the Continental Congress, he inherited little more than an ill-organized siege of British troops in Boston, a situation that had arisen almost accidentally in the aftermath of the battle of Bunker Hill. Washington, however, began his service with a clear understanding of the ultimate goal set for him by the Continental Congress: the total political independence of all the rebellious colonies and their acceptance as a state by what the Declaration of Independence termed "the powers of the earth" -- what we would today call the

---

constitutional convention and his resignation as President.

international community.[3] In addition, Washington understood that the political leaders of the revolution had a vision of the type of society an eventual, independent America ought to have: a republic, governed by civilians and as free as possible from civil faction.

The Congress's war aims were strikingly absolute. They aimed at complete independence of all the rebellious colonies. There was to be no negotiation of limited, continued ties to the Crown or of independence for only a portion of the territory occupied by the United Colonies. The tendency of American military strategy to set absolute goals – from the annihilation of the Indian threat after King Phillip's War in 1675, through the extinction of New France after the French and Indian War and on to the unconditional surrender of the Nazi and wartime Japanese states after the Second World War – is well documented.[4] The Continental Congress's approach to the Revolutionary War fits into this tradition.

Washington, therefore, began his command with a confused, almost make-shift military situation, but with clear guidance on the type of war he was to fight and the political goals he was to pursue. Throughout the war, Washington was to subordinate his military actions to the political goals set for him by the Continental Congress and would consistently turn to the Congress for political guidance, even though that guidance was sometimes confusing or not forthcoming at all. Since Washington viewed his military efforts as a political instrument of the Continental Congress, the degree of success of his strategy can help assess the validity of Clausewitz' principle that war must be subordinated to policy.

---

[3] Paret, Peter (ed.), Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Modern Age, Princeton University Press, 1986, pp. 408-411.
[4] See, for example, Paret, *op cit*, pp. 408-409.

The Conundrum of Centers of Gravity

Another Clausewitzian principle relevant to Washington's military approach is that of centers of gravity and the role they play in formulating strategy. Washington perceived that the centers of gravity of Great Britain and of the rebellious colonies were fundamentally different. Great Britain's center of gravity, Washington saw, was the will of the British government.[5] Consequently, the enemy's center of gravity lay far from America and was not directly accessible to Washington. This made his task harder by giving even the firmest offensive action a disadvantage of the defense – that the enemy cannot be defeated, but must itself decide when it has had enough.

The center of gravity of the rebellious colonies was quite different. These colonies were largely agricultural. There were few large cities and none of enormous political significance (even capturing the nominal "capital," Philadelphia, would not end the war, as the British were to confirm). The industrial war-making capability of the colonies could not be destroyed because there was little – most munitions were imported through an imperfect British blockade. Indeed, the only plausible center of gravity was the Continental Army.[6] Washington grasped this and, consequently, a major element of his strategy would be to protect the sheer existence of the army.[7]

Defending the Space

The political requirement imposed on Washington for all 13 colonies to be independent led immediately to the military need to defend them all. This was an impossible task for the Continental Army alone and, as we will see, it led Washington to

---

[5] Weigley, Russell F., The American Way of War, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana, p. 5

[6] It could also be argued that the will of the Continental Congress to prosecute the war was the real center of gravity, but that argument leaves open the question of how to get at that will . Destroying the army, on the other hand, was both achievable in principle and sufficient to bring the rebellion to an end.

fight important parts of the war using tactics he would have preferred to avoid. On the strategic level, however, there were two keys to maintaining the unity of the 13 colonies. It is noteworthy that each would lead, eventually, to a major American victory.

The first key was the traditional invasion route between Canada and the lower colonies, the Richlieu River – Lake Champlain – Hudson River line. Washington, in calling West Point the "key to America," understood that British control of this line would split the most rebellious colonies, those of New England, from the rest. It would also allow the British to communicate with their forces in Canada.[8] Washington's preoccupation with the traditional invasion route paid off in 1777, when the British unsuccessfully used it and their invasion force eventually was compelled to surrender at Saratoga.

If the Richlieu – Lake Champlain – Hudson route was essential for maintaining communications with the most rebellious colonies, the other geographical key to complete independence was to hold onto the least rebellious, those south of Virginia. The case that Washington grasped the importance of the south is somewhat weaker than in the case of New England. Obviously, he knew the South was important because, in his conception of the war, all the colonies were important and had to be defended. Moreover, the southern states were important suppliers of agricultural goods to the other colonies and to Washington's army. But when a brief window of opportunity opened in 1781 to conduct combined military operations with the French fleet and army, Washington first envisioned an attack on New York, which he considered to be the key to

---

[7] Weigley, *op cit*, p. 12.
[8] Keegan, John, Fields of Battle, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, p. 142.

the British position in North America.[9] He only reluctantly concluded that an envelopment of Cornwallis' army in its new position near Yorktown was more promising.

But whatever Washington's initial hesitations, once he embraced the siege of Yorktown, he put an end to the British threat to hinder communications between the southern and northern colonies through controlling the Chesapeake Bay. More importantly, of course, he ended the war in North America altogether by effecting the change of mind in the British government that he had sought.

Before leaving the topic of strategic geography, it should be mentioned that Washington's absolutist war goals led him into one serious miscalculation. Believing that, for the American colonies to be independent, all British troops had to be removed from North America, he ordered an invasion of British Canada by General Benedict Arnold in 1795.[10] The failure of that expedition compelled Washington to be content with the more modest goal of removing the British from the lower 13 colonies.

Maintaining the Army

As we have noted, Washington saw that his army was his own center of gravity. This had several consequences for strategy. Strategic defense was, in any case, an appropriate strategy since all Americans had to do to gain independence was to avoid defeat. The weakness of the army and the fact that it was the colonials' center of gravity made it an essential strategy. The Clausewitzian concept of the decisive battle operates

[9] Flexner, James Thomas, Washington, Signet, New York, 1969, p. 131.
[10] Weigley, *op cit*, pp. 7-8.

here, but in reverse: Washington's main preoccupation had to be to avoid the decisive battle that might annihilate his army.[11]

Consequently, Washington had to remain not only on the strategic defensive, but frequently on the tactical defensive, as well. He became a master at marching his army to avoid contact with large contingents of British forces and strove to accept combat only with forces small enough that they could be defeated. It was through repeated such "pin-prick" attacks that Washington hoped eventually to wear down the will of Great Britain to continue the war (incidentally, one respect in which Washington was distinctly non-Clausewitzian is that he did not share the latter's distrust of military intelligence. Washington's hit-and-run tactics required precise information on the location and strength of the various units of the army he faced, and he relied heavily on intelligence-gathering to give him this kind of information[12]).

The absolute necessity of maintaining the existence of the army meant that even the smallest tactical engagements could sometimes take on strategic significance. For example, one motivation for Washington's raid on British barracks in Trenton on Christmas Day, 1776 was that many army enlistments were to end a few days later, on January 1. The raid was intended, in part, to increase the army's morale so that enough soldiers would decide to re-enlist. The raid succeeded in this respect, as well as militarily.[13]

Why Not a Guerilla War?

The belief that the Revolutionary War was won by a spontaneous rising of untrained patriot-partisans ambushing redcoats from behind tree stumps is deeply rooted

[11] Weigley, *op cit*, p. 3.
[12] Weigley, *op cit*, p. 15.

in American mythology. In fact, however, Washington's strategy was to fight along conventional European lines and he tried to make the Continental Army resemble, as much as possible, a small European army. It is interesting to ask why he did this rather than choose to fight a guerilla war. A guerilla strategy was available and was strongly urged on him by General Charles Lee, his most senior commander and a politically influential officer.[14] Why did Washington reject this course?

As discussed above, one of the principal war goals set for Washington by the Continental Congress was for the rebellious colonies to become not merely independent, but accepted as a state by other powers. Washington believed that, for them to be accepted as a civilized nation, the colonies must fight in a "civilized" manner. This precluded a "barbaric" guerilla war.[15] In addition, Washington feared that guerilla war would lead to social upheaval and, perhaps, social revolution. This could endanger the goal of civil republican government.[16] Viewed in terms of Clausewitz' "trinity," Washington feared that a guerilla war would cause the people's passions to overwhelm political reason. Washington's choice of conventional tactics is thus another example of subordinating military means to long-term political ends, in accordance with Clausewitz' basic principles.

The picture concerning Washington and guerilla war requires somewhat more nuance than is presented above, however. First, Washington may have had other reasons for choosing a conventional style of war. After the French and Indian War, he had been

---

[13] Weigley, *op cit*, pp. 3-4.
[14] Shy, John, "American Strategy: Charles Lee and the Radical Alternative," in Shy, A People Numerous and Armed, Oxford University Press, New York, pp. 133-162.
[15] Paret, Peter, editor, Makers of Modern Strategy, Princeton University Press, 1986, p. 412.
[16] Shy, *op cit*, p. 161. Lee was a political, as well as a military radical, and may well have welcomed the potential political consequences of the military strategy he urged on Washington.

disappointed in his hope for a British (as opposed to merely colonial) army commission. A desire to make it clear to his British adversaries that he knew, after all, how to fight like a gentleman may have influenced his choice of strategy. A narrowness of military vision may also have played a role – after all, Washington had learned his military skills "on the job" with the regular British army in the French and Indian War, and was no theorist. Moreover, whatever complex of motives caused Washington to choose conventional war, guerilla warfare did take place within his overall strategy. A vicious guerilla war was waged by both sides in the Carolinas, including most famously by General Nathaniel Greene, Washington's hand-picked commander for the southern theater.[17]

Nevertheless, it is clear that Washington disliked and distrusted guerilla war and wished to fight, to the extent possible, as a conventional European commander. He believed, with Clausewitz,[18] that if guerillas must be used, they should operate in close cooperation with a conventional army – and the success of Nathaniel Greene's southern campaign can be attributed to Greene's ability to weave conventional and irregular forces together in support of common military goals.[19] Washington's misgivings about the social upheaval attending guerilla war and the type of leader thrown up by partisan combat (he particularly disliked Charles Lee) were to be echoed by later strategists[20] and confirmed in sad practice many times during the following 200 years.

---

[17] For some flavor of the continuing debate concerning Washington and guerilla war, see Wills, Garry, A Necessary Evil, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1999, pp. 25-42; Kwasney, Mark V., Washington's Partisan War, Kent State University Press, 1996; and Galvin, John, Minutemen, Pergamon-Brassey, 1989.

[18] On War, p. 480. Intriguingly, Mahan thought along the same lines. He argued that commerce raiders (the seafaring analogue of partisans) should only operate in close cooperation with a concentrated battle fleet. See Sumida, John, Inventing Grand Strategy and Teaching Command: The Classic Works of Alfred Thayer Mahan Reconsidered, p. 45

[19] Weigley, *op cit*, p. 36.

[20] Liddel Hart, B.H., Strategy, Faber & Faber, London, 1954, p. 369.

Beyond the War

In the end, of course, Washington triumphed. The British center of gravity, the will of its government to pursue the war, did collapse after Yorktown. The Congress's vision of the 13 colonies independent from Britain and united as a civil republic became true. But this vision was not realized either at Yorktown, or when the armistice was finally signed two years later, in September 1783, or even when Washington himself sat on the banks of the Harlem River and watched the British fleet sail for home on November 25, 1783.

The peace agreement signed with Great Britain provided for, among other things, the withdrawal of all British armed forces from the territory of the United States, the handing over of forts along the northwest borders of the new state, the rights of Americans to fish in British waters and the restoration of normal trade relations.[21] In fact, however, Great Britain failed to fulfill these terms completely. It even continued to man forts on U.S. territory and to encourage local Indians to harass American settlers. As President, therefore, Washington was compelled to continue to pursue the goals inscribed in the peace treaty. The agreement that resulted, the Jay Treaty, completed in 1794, was controversial at the time of its signing and remains so. It did, however, attain the goals originally set in the 1783 peace treaty and can, therefore, be seen as a diplomatic culmination of Washington's wartime strategy.

Washington had other business left over from the war, which had left America a party to a permanent alliance with France. This wartime expedient became troublesome after the French Revolution, when the revolutionary government of France began to interfere actively in the internal politics of the U.S., particularly through the activities of

the French minister to the U.S., the notorious "Citizen Genet." Fearing that French meddling would worsen the tensions between pro-French and pro-British Americans, Washington arranged to have Genet recalled and encouraged Congress to pass the Neutrality Act of 1794, designed to outlaw the type of activities pursued by Genet. Ultimately, Washington's successor, John Adams, fought a three-year undeclared naval war with France over French seizures of American shipping and finally persuaded Napoleon to dissolve the U.S.-French alliance.[22] It is in this context, of French subversion of American politics, that Washington's warning against "permanent alliances" should be interpreted. More broadly, the Neutrality Act of 1794, the Jay Treaty and the warning against the French alliance – aimed as they were at strengthening American independence -- can be viewed as a continuation of Washington's strategy during the Revolutionary War, but now returned to the purely political plane.

Conclusion

Washington's military career ended many years before Clausewitz was to codify his own strategic views in On War. Moreover, the American Revolutionary War – fought in North America, between a state and a rebellious territory, over a prolonged period – was far from the type of conflict that was the Prussian theorist's main focus. Nevertheless, Washington's success shows the relevance of several of Clausewitz' most important principles in the American revolutionary context. The idea that war must be waged with a clear vision of the desired peace and must, therefore, be firmly subordinated to policy is foremost among these. It is made manifest by Washington's acceptance of war goals from the Continental Congress and by his consistent

---

[21] Pratt, Julius, *et al*, A History of U.S. Foreign Policy, Prentice-Hall, New Jersey, 1980, pp. 32-33.
[22] Pratt, *op cit*, pp. 13-14.

subordination to the will and advice of the Congress, even in the most difficult circumstances (and his insistence that his officers do the same). Not only America's independence, but also its firm principle of civilian control of the military owes much to Washington's "Clausewitizian" approach to war.

Secondly, Washington's skepticism of guerilla warfare, supported by an intuitive feel for Clausewitz' trinity, may well have allowed the United States to begin its existence, and later to develop, with less bitterness and faction than would otherwise have been the case. In more than one way, then, we may still be enjoying the benefits of Washington's "Clausewitzian" strategy.

Finally, as discussed above, Washington as President felt compelled to continue to pursue some of his wartime goals when they appeared threatened. In doing so, he placed American independence and stability on a sounder basis and would have received an approving nod from Clausewitz for understanding that war, in itself, is never final. Or, as another American Clausewitzian, Henry Kissinger, was to emphasize repeatedly 200 years later -- in the end, all solutions must be political.